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Soviet arms to Cuba said to triple in '81

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Washington—The Reagan administration yesterday accused the Soviet Union of shipping three times as many arms to Cuba last year as in any of the past 20 years.

The administration's assertion came in the wake of reports that U.S. intelligence had spotted aircraft crates containing new MiG-23 planes being unloaded in Cuba.

Intelligence sources confirmed reports that the crates had arrived in Cuba, but added they were unsure whether the crates contained new planes or replacements and spare parts for the MiG-23 squadron that arrived in Cuba in 1978.

The sources said Cuba received an estimated 62,200 metric tons of Soviet arms last year, compared with about 20,000 tons in 1980 and most other years since the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, when Fidel Castro's government received an estimated 250,000 tons of armaments.

Among last year's supplies, according to the sources, were medium tanks, armored troop carriers, amphibious armored reconnaissance vehicles, portable SA-6 surface-to-air missile launchers, radar, missile transporters for higher altitude SA-2 antiaircraft weapons, self-propelled artillery pieces and antitank and antiaircraft guns.

Larry M. Speakes, deputy White House press secretary, declined to confirm such details but said, "We do know that the Soviets have expanded the military modernization of Cuba.

"Last year the arms shipments were the highest since 1962, in fact, three times larger than any year since 1962," Mr. Speakes said.

He added: "This is a matter of great concern because of Cuba's increased ability to project force in this hemisphere and other parts of the world, principally in Africa and the Middle East."

Mr. Speakes said the U.S. would "continue to make our views known in straightforward terms," and suggested President Reagan would address the issue in "the near future."

Other officials said reference to the Cuban arms buildup was contained in an initial draft of the State of the Union message Mr. Reagan is to deliver to a joint session of Congress at 9 o'clock tonight.

The officials said they were not sure that the Cuban reference had survived the final editing of the speech, but indicated that if the matter was not raised tonight it would be emphasized in a future foreign policy statement.

The Reagan administration has sought to avoid the sort of embarrassing frustration President Carter invited by identifying the presence of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba, calling it "unacceptable" and then having to live with it without being able to take any effective reprisals.

Among the options the Reagan administration has studied is a public campaign to alert popular opinion to the "critical situation," and the need for increased military preparedness, including the development of contingency plans for action against Cuba.

Mr. Speakes said yesterday that "a wide range of options" was available to the president, and added: "It may very well be the president might like to implement one of those options."

He hurriedly corrected the impression that the administration was considering imminent action by emphasizing that the options had been available for some time and simply continued in force.

The administration's concern over the sudden increase in Soviet arms shipments is that many of the weapons are being transshipped to Central America.

Administration officials believe the Cubans are establishing a major military base in Nicaragua with tanks, missiles and airplanes. The officials point out that the Nicaraguans are lengthening military runways in apparent anticipation of receiving MiGs—probably early-model MiG-15s and 17s—and constructing an air defense system "against a nonexistent threat."

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